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Windtunneling

A THESIS DEVELOPMENT TECHNIQUE

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Ever struggled to craft a meaningful, compelling thesis?
Do you often sit at your computer in frustration, drinking your slug juice and procrastinating on an assignment?

Well, I have. For a long while, formulating a thesis took me an inordinate amount of time. Finding the exact right choice of words and creating a framework for the rest of the paper were so difficult that I would often rewrite my thoughts many times before settling on a thesis.

Sometimes, this kind of intensive rewriting is necessary, especially with longer papers that require more involved arguments. Yet the inefficiency of my process—the frustration I felt—would cause me to push off writing until the last possible moment. The pressure from having to finish the assignment would force me to think quickly and hone in on one thesis as soon as possible. Naturally, this haste worsened my arguments; in order to save time, I cherry-picked my support and put little reflection into my papers.

Late in my cadet career, however, I developed a great technique that I call windtunneling. It can be used well in advance; even days or weeks ahead of due dates, it forces me to think more expansively, organize my thoughts, strengthen my argument, and ultimately to devise well-crafted theses that can knock the socks off any audience!

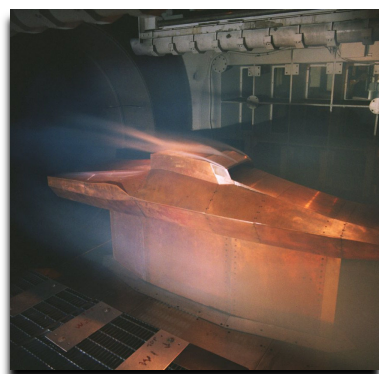


Windtunneling takes a collaborative approach to the thesis-building process without risking inappropriate collaboration (or collusion). It allows someone else to track and judge your ideas very early on, when you are best positioned to invent and shape a paper that truly reflects the argument you want to make. Furthermore, it forces you to sit down and work, as an effective partner will prompt and guide your continuous expression of ideas.

To start windtunneling, simply turn the page for my 5-step process...



Windtunneling is a metaphor for a specific form of collaboration that can occur between two people. The first, the speaker, acts as the wind, spewing as much as they can at the other partner. The other partner acts as the recipient of the wind, seemingly getting crushed like the person shown above. Their job is to withstand the onslaught of words in an attempt to gauge meaning and direction for the speaker.



1. Find a partner willing to give about 20 minutes of their time to help you. You are going to be giving this person word vomit for a while, so make sure you find someone you trust to stay engaged. Sit them down with a paper and pen, or their laptop or tablet, and give them instructions to record anything striking, unique, or potentially supportive of an argument from what you are about to say.

2. Brief your partner on the assignment prompt and material you're working with. Knowing something about your writing situation will help your collaborator know what to look for and how to prompt you as you talk.

3. Simply begin talking about your paper, brainstorming aloud, continuously for a set time (usually 10-15 minutes). Set a timer: you're not allowed to stop talking until time is up. This moderate length of time will allow you to begin by rehearsing ideas and support you already have but then, as you run out of initial ideas, force you to think of additional claims and connections. Your partner will write down what you say, and they can also stimulate your thinking by asking pertinent questions as you talk. (*Note: your partner shouldn't worry about trying to get down everything you say; the point is to capture interesting claims, potential questions or concerns, specific pieces of evidence, and so forth—diverse building blocks for a larger argument.*)

4. Once you reach the time limit, give your partner some time to finish writing. You can talk faster than your partner can write, so it is important to give them a couple of extra minutes to complete the record of your speech and elaborate on any abbreviations. You'll then look over the results with your partner; carefully reflect on the material and exchange opinions about anything that seems particularly promising. Pay attention, because here is where you'll find the core of your thesis and support.

START WRITING, NO MATTER WHAT. THE WATER DOES NOT FLOW UNTIL THE FAUCET IS TURNED ON.

- LOUIS L'AMOUR

5. Start drafting—you should have some good ideas to guide your work! Write out a provisional thesis from your results by crossing out anything that's irrelevant and articulating the connections between your most compelling thoughts: how do they go together? what impact do they make?

If you get stuck, just go ahead and windtunnel again, changing partners as helpful. Good luck!